

## “Ahead of Us”

Easter Sermon, April 12<sup>th</sup>, 2020

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“He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.” (Matt. 28:7)

“The LORD is the one who goes ahead of you; He will be with you. He will not fail you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed.” (Deut. 31:8)

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If you ever get a chance to watch the Pasolini film, *The Gospel According to St Matthew*, then don't miss it. You'll see something there you won't see in any of the other films about the life of Jesus: over and over again, Jesus is ahead of his disciples, walking, sometimes almost running ahead of them. When he teaches them, instead of gathering them around in a circle, like a Sunday School teacher, he bounds on ahead, throwing parables and sayings over his shoulder as he goes. Once you've seen it, you won't forget it.

Near the end of Matthew's Gospel, the angels tell the two Marys: “He has risen from the dead and *is going ahead of you* into Galilee.” He's going ahead of them, to the old place, Galilee, the place where it all began. There he'll offer a new beginning - total forgiveness, a fresh start, a fresh calling.

Let's pause to think about those words “going ahead”, because they take us to the heart of what Easter is all about. To claim Jesus is risen from the dead is to claim Jesus has gone ahead of us, not just into Galilee but into a new kind of life . . . beyond death, a life without pain and without tears, a life without the guilt that we can't shake off, a life without the threat of a virus and the menace of death. Let's remember this is not resuscitation, like Lazarus, who goes back to his old life only to die

again. This is resurrection: Jesus rises never to die again. He's gone ahead of us into what the New Testament calls the New Creation, this life made new, this world made new.

And let's not forget, he's gone ahead . . . *as one of us*, as someone who's lived our life, walked this earth and breathed this air. In him, God came *as one of us*. As one of us, he took on the evil of this world with all its agony and misery . . . the wretchedness of being betrayed, the sorrow of losing those we love most. All the hurt and malice and hatred of a world gone wrong - he takes it all on, as one of us, he goes to the place where this world does its very worst. And it does. He breathes his last, he dies, as one of us. But God *raises* him from the grave, he forges a way *through* death. Jesus has gone ahead of us *through* that dark door *as one of us*, into a new life, where everything is made new, including his own physical body. He's gone ahead of us as one of us.

But not just *as one of us*, he's gone ahead *for us*. He went ahead to prepare a way for us. Like a mountain-guide on some great peak, or a tour-guide in some noisy city. No matter what journey of uncertainty we face, he has been on it. He has flattened the land ahead of us, forged a path, cleared the route. No matter what roadblock we come up against, he has found a way through it. No matter what storm looms on the horizon, he's found a way beyond it. Everything that threatens to defeat us, he has defeated - for us. The very worst that could happen to us has already been dealt with - for us. So when he says "follow me", we *can* trust him.

A friend of mine once told me I should think about Easter as a bit like what sometimes happens when you live abroad, in a different time zone. Each year I spend a few months in North Carolina, and North Carolina is five hours behind the UK. Occasionally, when I go to bed I forget to switch my phone off, and someone in England wakes me in the middle of the night. "Isn't it a glorious day? Oops . . . sorry, it's still night there, right? Never mind; time you got up!"

So it is with Easter. We're living in the old time zone. It's dark outside, and it's often hard to believe a dawn will ever come. But suppose in the middle of the night we got a call - not by text or phone this time, but

from someone whose *already living* in the New Time, already enjoying the glorious sunlight and warmth of the day to come. He tells us that where he is the new day has already dawned, and we'd better wake up. It's time we started living as those who know the dawn will come.

During the last few weeks we've all been living in a strange kind of darkness, haunted by an eerie dread, an anxious haze that casts its shadow over everything. (It's all the stranger because the weather's been so good here.) And we don't know when it will end. In our bleaker moments, perhaps we wonder if it ever will. And that forces us to think hard about what really matters - the way you sometimes do when you wake up in the middle of the night, and the makeup is off and there's no one around to impress. The future can seem horribly uncertain, very out of control. Let's face it, death does mock every pretension that we're in complete control of our future, that we can solve whatever comes at us; that whatever lies ahead, we'll be able to sort it out.

Easter faces us with a pretty stark choice, an either/or. *Either* death does get the last say, we're not in control, and there's ultimately nothing but nothing ahead, for us and the whole universe. (The scientific evidence does seem to point in that direction.) *Or* there is One clothed with the power and love of God who *has already gone ahead of us* into the New Day as a promise of what is to come - who's more alive than any of us, and ready to give us that life right now. (And the evidence for *that* having happened is as strong as ever.)

I had an email the other day from a former student, now a Vicar, whose wife is a nurse. He writes: "We are both well, but if I am honest, I am apprehensive for [my wife] who is working on the frontline in A&E with limited protective equipment. Hearing of the recent deaths of two nurses does raise the apprehension, but we are not letting fear have control."

Who has control on Easter Day? The One who has gone ahead of us, who will make all things new, and who now says to us: "follow me."

Christ is risen. He is risen indeed!